

And the World is Still by UnoriginalToast

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Summary:

The dust settles. The world is still. Eleven is there, alive and safe, and Jim brings her home.

A one-shot series centered around El and Hopper's father/daughter relationship. Spoilers for season 2

Current Chapter: Eleven has a tough first day of school. Hopper helps.

1. Home

Author's Note:

After finishing season 2 of Stranger Things, I have 2 wishes:

1. A spin-off series with Steve and the 6 kids where he babysits them and but they always end up running around fighting monsters
2. A full season of Hopper and El family fluff.

I'm going to get neither and don't have time to write the first, so I came up with this when I was bored at work. This is it, so enjoy!

The dust settles and the world is still.

Jim holds his gun and his breath. He doesn't realize he is holding either until he hears a deep but soft metallic thud to his right. The man lets out a breath and lowers the long gun at the same time. He turns to where the young girl was standing just a moment before, tall and proud and larger than life, but now she lays still on the elevator floor.

Hopper sinks to the ground at the same time his heart does and frantically searches through the dim light to find any sign that the girl is alright, or at the very least, alive. It's only when he places the back of his palm on her warm cheek does he feel the even breaths against his skin. He lets out another shaky breath of relief.

"Hey, kid?"

Her eyelids flutter and after a long moment, she's staring back at him. Her face is unreadable as is his, one of many things they have in common but don't realize. What Hopper can tell is that she's exhausted, so exhausted. Dark circles have appeared from nowhere under her eyes that are now only half open. He wastes no more time in scooping her up into a tight hug, his nose burying into her now messy brown hair. She tenses at the contact, not used to hugs from most people and certainly not from him, but she soon relaxes against

his chest and wraps her arms around his neck. She feels the leather on his jacket and the puff of panted breaths on her neck. She feels safe. For the first time in a long time, she is safe.

“You did good kid,” Jim whispers, his voice raspy and heavy with a strange raw emotion. It’s filled with relief and pride, but also with regret that she ever had to do something like this in the first place. There they were in a rusty elevator hanging over hell itself, but the hell that Eleven had been through was worse than whatever had lived in that pit. If he could give anything at all to this child it would be a normal life.

And then she slumps against him and he pulls away in confusion and worry. No, he realizes with a shaky breath of relief, she’s alright, but asleep now. Two thick trails of blood stem from her nose and Hopper assumes there’s a smudge of red on his shirt, like the smudge lining the girl’s upper lip. He places a hand on her cheek and she is warm, unnaturally warm, and he knows she needs rest.

He stands, the sound of his kneecaps popping fill the silence of the area and he hoists El into his arms. She immediately buries her head into his arm and one hand reaches over to grasp the leather jacket. It’s a tight squeeze, tighter than Hopper thinks her capable of, but he also knows now not to underestimate her. He leans over and presses the button to raise the elevator. Briefly, as the gears squeak and clang in the empty space, he looks down into hell before raising his head upwards towards the light.

Mike isn’t happy when Jim tells him they aren’t going back to Will’s house. He doesn’t blame the kid especially after all they went through that night and especially not after he had been lied to about where El was for a year. But, now isn’t the time. At this point, Hopper can only think of sleep and quietness, and he’s sure Eleven feels the same. She’d pushed herself further than ever before and now she’s burning up a little. Jim is sure she will be fine, but he worries anyway and wants a chance to let her rest before being overwhelmed by questions from her friends. Thankfully, Joyce, Will, Jonathan, and Nancy return during their chat and Nancy manages to convince Mike

to come home for a few hours of sleep before decompressing.

So now Jim drives through the dimly lit streets, his gaze shifting to Eleven every few minutes to be sure she was still there. It was as though he anticipates she will disappear and he feels relief every time he sees her small form pressed against the window of the truck.

The girl stirs only a little when Jim pulls up to the cabin and turns off the car. The man looks up at the sky as light blossoms over the heavens. The new day is breaking, but all Jim can think about is finding heavy blankets to drape over the windows. Even after all that darkness, light is the last thing he wants to see, at least until he gets some rest.

He steps out and walks around the car before tugging on the handle to open the passenger door. Gently, he picks up the girl and brings her into the house. It's still warm from the heat they put Will under and a little messed up, but he figured they don't need a squeaky clean house to sleep.

Jim enters the small room that was... is still El's and lays her in the bed. It is then that the girl wakes, though only briefly, and she seems confused as to where she is. "Where?" she rasps, too tired to think of all the words needed to ask a more complex question.

"Home," Jim replies, also not wanting a long conversation. "Sleep."

"Sleep?" she seems perplexed by the word, but then she nods, deciding that sleep sounds like the most wonderful idea. "Sleep." She pauses. "Stay?"

"Yes, we'll stay here for now," Jim replies as he tucks another blanket around her.

"No. You."

"Me?" Eleven nods. "Yeah, okay. I'll stay." She seems to relax more into the sheets.

Jim stands and enters the living room. He grabs the small couch and drags it into the room and it completely blocks the door, but it fits and that's good enough for now. He throws more blankets onto it and

a pillow or two, but he knows it won't take much comfort to get him to sleep after the night he'd just had. It's amazing, though, he thinks as he glances at El who is still staring at him, but struggling to keep her eyes open, how the two of them are able to hold a full conversation with just a few simple words. It might have been a tough year and it wasn't entirely fair to keep her locked up in the house, but they had grown and learned from each other. He had given El safety and a friend. And El had given him something else that he couldn't quite name. But, it's a perfect and pure thing. He at least knows that much.

"I did good?" Eleven's breaks into Jim's thoughts as he lays on the couch. He looks up and nods, though she can't see his face from her position on the bed. The couch is a good foot shorter than it and El is on her back, wrapped up tightly in the blankets.

"Yes," he replies. "Now sleep. You need it."

There's another pause and El rolls over so she can peer over the bed. He looks back at her tired, but curious eyes and gives her a small but warm smile. "Sleep.," he says again, this time a little more sternly, but with the same warmth as before.

"You'll be here?" she asks, her voice small. It had been a long night and she doesn't want Jim to leave. After fighting all those monsters and closing the gate to the Upside Down, the darkness still scares her and she fears being left alone.

Jim reaches up and grasps her hand in his like he had in the truck on the way to the lab. She appears a little surprised at the contact and searches his face for a clue as to what he is thinking. But, the man is as unreadable as usual and something about that feels comforting to El. He is a mystery, like her. And together the two mysteries form a bond that goes beyond simple words. Still, Jim only has simple words to rely on, so he uses them.

"Yes, I'll be here," Hopper says, giving her hand a little squeeze. "I'll always be here, kid."

She seems satisfied with this and relaxes and within a few seconds, she's back asleep. Hopper closes his eyes and breathes in the silence.

He feels ten pounds lighter, but his heart is full of love and pride for this girl... *his* girl.

All is well. The world is still.

2. Sick

Sunlight struggles to shine through the small window in the tiny room. The wooden planks that cover it prevent the sun from doing much more than sprinkling the room with little dots of light here and there. Aside from the faint sounds of birds chirping in the woods just beyond the thick wood walls of the old cabin, everything is silent and still.

Hopper takes a deep breath in as he slowly regains consciousness. He wonders how long he has been asleep, since the sunlight gives him no clues and the nearest clock is in the kitchen. But it is daylight and he is home and that is comfort enough.

Slowly, and then all at once, the memories of the night before flood his mind and he feels the bile of anxiety rising in his throat. He coughs and wipes his now sweaty palms through his greasy, unwashed hair. He struggles to control the pounding of his heart and he takes another, deep calming breath, trying to use the stillness to calm his fears.

He realizes suddenly that his eyes are still closed and he opens them and looks right up to where the young girl is still fast asleep on the bed. And that, apparently, is the medicine his heart needs because he instantly feels better. Eleven... El... Jane. She is alright. She is there and so is he, in their world. In their crazy, messed up, irritating, but so wonderfully pure and vibrant world.

Slowly, he sits up and the small pops of his back break through the silence. Sleeping on that couch was not comfortable, but he vows he'd sleep on a million crusty old couches for her in a heartbeat. She'd asked him to stay after all, and how could he turn down the kid who just saved their entire world? Besides, Hopper admits to himself, it feels nice to be needed like this again.

He reaches out to her and runs a hand through her messy hair. It's partly slicked back, partly flying away, and desperately in need of a wash, but Hopper doesn't care. He runs his hand through the hair again, parting it gently on the side. It is then that he notices the warmth radiating from her forehead and he brings his hand down so

his entire palm is covering the top of her face.

She's burning.

"Shit."

The anxiety wells up again and Hopper feels like he's going to burst. She was warm when they first got home last night or early this morning, or whenever it was. But, by now, Hopper had thought she'd be alright, but she's not. Or maybe he just doesn't want to face the fact that another young girl in his care is sick.

El's eyes flutter open, but Jim doesn't notice. He still has his hand on her forehead and is moving nervously from side to side. She studies him for a moment and thinks briefly about going back to sleep, but decides against it.

"Hi." Her voice floats wistfully up to Hopper's ears and the man jumps as he shoots a glance back down to her. He looks shocked that her eyes are open and then relieved and he offers her a weak smile.

"Hey, kid," he whispers, as his lips form a thin line behind his beard that doesn't quite reach his eyes. El considers the look, but can't find the words to ask what is wrong. She feels so tired and so hot. She wants to kick all the blankets off and roll around in the crisp November air, but she also feels like her body is made of bricks.

"Hot."

"I know." Hopper's fingers go through her hair again and he sighs, trying to steady himself. She's awake. She's talking. She's okay. "You had a tough night and I think you have a fever."

"Fever?" The word seems familiar and she thinks she's heard it before, but she's too tired to reach into the depths of her mind and pull the meaning out.

"Very warm," Hopper clarifies. "You are, I mean. You're sick."

Oh, sick. Eleven has been sick before, so that makes sense. "I'm sick." It's not a question, but a statement as she considers her current condition. "You're not happy." Eleven sighed. Not happy was not the

most accurate way to describe the man who was nervously chewing on his lower lip, but she couldn't think of words.

"No." He can't help but let out a little chuckle at that. He is so far beyond not happy. "But you'll be okay. I just wasn't expecting you to be all sick this morning, so you caught me off guard. I mean, jeeze kid. You look exhausted. Terrible."

"Terrible?"

"Bad," Hopper says. "But not like being bad; just looking not good."

"Not pretty?"

Hopper pales. "No!" he says quickly, reaching to squeeze her shoulder. El looks confused and he realizes she wasn't being self-conscious, just trying to learn. "No," he says more calmly. "You look pretty. Just sick."

"I'm pretty sick?" El asks tiredly. Her eyelids are fluttering again and it looks like she's blinking really slowly. Hopper smiles and ruffles her hair and she sighs with content at the feeling. It's familiar and comfortable.

"You are, in all senses of the word," he tells her. "You need to sleep okay? Can I get you anything? Water?"

"Eggo?"

Hopper stops and stares at the girl in amused disbelief. He shakes his head and laughs, a deep belly laugh that confuses the girl but eventually brings a small smile to her face. She doesn't know why he's laughing, but she's glad he is. It makes her feel better, more relaxed. Like she isn't sick.

"You just saved the entire world and now you're burning up and all you want is a freaking waffle? Jeeze kid, you're something else." But El is still looking at him hopefully, as though he might actually go make her a delicious Eggo. He's almost tempted to do it too, but then she yawns and he knows she needs more sleep.

"How about this? You get some sleep and when you wake up we'll

see what you're able to handle, okay? How's that for a compromise?"

Compromise. El knows that word. She doesn't even have to think hard about it. "Halfway happy," she recalls.

"Yeah, halfway happy. Cool? Are you, uh, halfway happy with that?"

"No."

"No?" Hopper frowns. That's about as good as his offer is going to get, especially with her looking like she's about to pass out at any second.

"I'm all the way happy."

His face softens and he puffs an amused breath of air through his nose. Damn, this kid. She brings out the best in him and has made him a total softy, but she's also given him someone to protect. Redemption.

He sits down on the couch that's still taking up the rest of the space in the room and grabs her hand. "I'm all the way happy too," He tells her and stays there until she drifts back to sleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

So I have a lot of feelings for El and Hopper's relationship and I realized I have so many more questions and thoughts and ideas for stories that either were or were not explored in the actual series. So, I decided to take this story and make it a one shot series. Each story is relatively stand alone, though some will connect (like the first chapter does with this one), and I hope you enjoy it!

3. The Hair Tie

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay so did you guys fricking notice that Hopper gave El the hair tie that was his daughter's to wear at the dance??? Because holy shit I was at work and found that out and nearly started crying and then I had to write it so here it is!

And if you didn't notice, look it up. It'll break you but it's also adorable!

Hopper never knew it could take someone so long to get ready.

He tries to think back to when he was married, or when he was taking Sarah to preschool, but nothing immediately hits him. Are all girls like this? Even the ones who haven't had a normal childhood? Or maybe El is becoming too normal. No, he remembers with an eye-roll, as the image of El using her powers to sneak the Eggos out of the freezer comes into his mind's eye. She certainly isn't quite at "normal" yet.

"Come on, kid!" He calls as he crosses the small cabin to a door on the other end of the main room. He raps loudly on the door. "You're gonna be late."

"Not ready!" Comes the reply. Hopper sighs.

"You've got five minutes before I'm dragging you out, clothes or not!" He pauses and considers that she's about to go to a middle school dance. "Scratch that, you better have something on!" Goddamn middle school hormones.

"Ugh!" She's frustrated, he can tell. He lets out another sigh and knocks, this time more softly, on the door.

"Can I help?" He knows nothing about helping a teenaged girl get dressed, but, really, how hard can it be? A bow here, a dress there, and be sure she doesn't go out without shoes on.

There's a hesitant pause, but the door slowly opens a crack and El peeks through it and up at Hopper. "Not good," is all she says with a sour look on her face. Jim gently pushes the door aside and braces himself to find El standing there...

Looking fine. Actually, she looks quite nice in the ruffled blue dress and the headband pushing back her hair. He's glad the whole emo phase didn't make it past the first shower after the Gate was closed. She looks great either way, but she looks lovely now, all dressed up for the dance. Or, he supposes. He knows nothing of current girl fashion trends.

"Um. What's not good?" he asks. Her nose isn't bleeding and nothing is levitating. It looks like the night is off to a good start.

"Me," El says sadly as she turns to the mirror propped up against the wall. "I don't look good."

Shit. Self-consciousness. Enemy number one of teen girls. He was hoping she would blow right past that phase given her background and all. After all, what could be more of a confidence booster than saving the entire world? But, he had to remember that, as abnormal as she could be, she was still a teenager about to go to her first school dance, wearing a dress she had never worn before.

"What are you talking about?" Hopper says slowly, showing rare restraint with his words. "You look great! I mean look at your dress! And hair! And... stuff." Man, no wonder why he couldn't get a date. He was not practiced at compliments and "you did good kid" doesn't quite seem to fit the situation.

There's a brightening in El's face and she smiles, a tint of red touching her cheeks. "You think so?"

"Yeah." Hopper comes forward and picks the headband off her head. He brushes out her hair again, puffing out the curls as much as he can before setting the headband back. It gathers more hair this time and the curls fall looser, but otherwise, not much else has changed. "There. Perfect."

El considers herself in the mirror for a long time before she turns to

Hopper with a stern look. He's taken aback and worried that she's about to cry or scream at him. Or worse, both. "Friends don't lie," she says, her voice hard with emotion. Hopper's immediate reaction is to get defensive and raise his voice, but he stops himself. Instead, he sighs and relaxes his shoulders. He takes both hands and places them gently, but firmly on El's shoulders and looks her square in the eye.

"You look great, kid," he tells her, his voice soft. "Beautiful. Gorgeous."

"Gorgeous?" El has never heard that word before.

"Yeah, like beautiful times two."

"I look beautiful times two?"

"Times a million." Hopper smiles and then she does too. El isn't sure she believes him. After all, the girls she sees in the magazines that sometimes make their way into the mail have longer hair and brighter eyes. But friends also don't lie, and Hopper is one of her best friends. If he thinks she's beautiful times a million, she believes him.

"But other girls--" she starts.

"Forget them. Just focus on you. Now, are you ready? We're gonna be late."

El glances back in the mirror one last time. She thinks to the other girls, to Max, to Nancy, and then she takes Hopper's advice and forgets them. And then there she is, standing with her short brown curls and her deep blue dress and she thinks that maybe--just maybe--she looks beautiful times two.

"Ready."

"Good, come on." They make their way out to the living room and as he's pulling on his coat he realizes he doesn't have a camera. He wishes he did, but maybe someone at the dance will have one. Or, he'll remember to give her money for pictures taken by Joyce's kid. There are so many things--pictures, coat, shoes, dresses--that he's never had to think of before, or that he hasn't thought of in years that he needs to consider now. He hopes he's doing a somewhat good job.

They drive almost in silence to the school, but El is buzzing with emotions. Nervousness, self-consciousness, excitement. It's been awhile since she's seen her friends and she misses them. Of course, they come over every now and then, but school takes much of their time and Hopper doesn't want people seeing them going to the cabin too often. He still wants to lay low and she doesn't blame him, but she also yearns to be normal.

They pull into the parking lot and Hopper shuts off the car, but neither move. They glance at each other and El looks away, embarrassed.

"Go on, you'll be fine." Hopper laughs. "You survived closing the Gate, I think you can survive a middle school dance." She doesn't respond. Hopper sighs and looks at his hands and that's when he knows exactly how he can help.

"Hey, I have something for you." This gets El's attention and she looks back up at him, wondering what in the world that could be. She watches as he removes a blue bracelet from his wrist, the one he always wears, but that El barely notices because it's become a part of him by now. He holds it out to her and she hesitates, unsure if she should take it, but he pushes it out further. She picks it up and holds it, regarding it in her hand.

"Go ahead. Put it on."

She does. It's a little too bright to match her dress, but it looks nice on her wrist. She glances back at Hopper and there's an emotion in his eyes that she can't quite place. There has to be some significance to this hair tie that she doesn't understand because the man looks like he's about to cry. He doesn't, but he swallows thickly and places a hand on her shoulder.

"That will give you good luck," he says.

"Good luck?"

"Yeah. It's always given me good luck. I wear it every day. I was wearing it when I found you." He pauses. "It used to belong to someone very special and I wear it every day to remember her. I

think she'd really like you, El, and I think she'd want to bring you good luck."

El opens her mouth to ask questions. Who is she? Why did she have this hair tie? How can a cloth band give luck? But, Hopper is already pushing her out the door. "Go! The whole damn thing will be over before you get in there if you don't get moving!"

She opens the door and hops out and is just about to close it when she stops. She looks back at him one last time. "I look beautiful times two?"

"Times a million."

The door slams and she's hurrying through the parking lot towards the school and in another flash, she's gone. Hopper rests his chin atop his hands on the wheel. His wrist feels empty, but his heart is full and he already can't wait to hear El's recount of all the amazing and magical things that happened at the Snow Ball.

4. Celebration

Summary for the Chapter:

El demands a Christmas party and then gets quite the gift of her own.

"We need a tree."

Hopper glances up from his newspaper and stares across the table at the girl in front of him. She's halfway through three Eggos *and an apple*, he adds to himself proudly. See? Not everything they eat is completely unhealthy. Though, he notes, the apple has barely been touched.

"You better eat that." He gestures to the apple with the paper.

El furrows her brows in confusion as she looks at the apple and then rolls her eye with a sigh. "I will," she whines. "We need a tree."

"And what do you think our house is surrounded by out here in the woods?" Hopper asks with a raised eyebrow. "We've got trees for days. Now, eat your breakfast."

"No. Inside. An inside tree."

He puts his paper down and leans on the table. "You want to grow a tree in the house?"

"A Christmas tree!"

Oh. *Oh*. Right. That. Hopper sighs and leans back, the chair creaking under the suddenly shifted weight. El doesn't understand why her statement garnered that reaction, but she's also glad he doesn't think she wants to actually try growing a tree in the cabin. She takes a bite of her apple.

"Do you even know what Christmas is?" Hopper asks. Did she celebrate Christmas? He was sure she didn't as a subject in the lab. What about her mom, what if her mom was Jewish or something? He didn't want to push it.

Oh, who was he kidding? He always got his back up about Christmas, every single year. And every single year it felt like they were celebrating it sooner than before just to mock him. He didn't know what it was about Christmas specifically, there were other holidays after all, but something about it made him really hurt for his daughter. And now he had... another daughter, but things were different, and he wanted to make new memories and give her Christmas, but he also had quite a few walls up.

"Yes," El was answering indignantly, a smirk on her lips. Where did get that smart ass, I know more than you, smirk? Oh, right. Probably him. "It's about a baby that turns into a man and gives presents under a tree."

Well, that's... a theory. Hopper tries to stop himself from laughing and mostly succeeds, but El can tell that she might have been a little off. "Okay. I mean, Christmas is kind of whatever you want it to be. It's just a celebration."

"Celebration?" There's a word El hasn't heard before and her eyes light up at the prospect of a new definition.

"A party."

"Friends?"

"Well... yeah. A party with friends."

El is smiling now, a wide smile that absolutely lights up the room. Hopper doesn't understand why she's so excited. Hell, she's basically bouncing off her seat. Christ, that's what he gets for feeding her sugary, processes Eggos every morning. It's not until she speaks that he finally gets just why she's so incredibly excited.

"We will have a Christmas Party!"

How could he have said no? She was practically ready to blast off into space, she was so excited about the idea of having a Christmas Party that in that moment, that moment of weakness, he might have said yes. And then, in a totally unrelated moment of weakness, he

might have called Joyce who took his "How do I get out of this?" call for "Hey, wanna come over to my cabin in the middle of nowhere and have a Christmas party?" And, of course, after she says yes to that (because she was yet another person Hopper suddenly couldn't say no to), Will and Jonathan find out, and Jonathan invites Nancy, and Will invites Lucas who asks if Max can come, and then Lucas invites Mike who invites Dustin who says he'll get a ride with Steve.

And that right there is the story of how Jim Hopper now has a bunch of people standing around in his cabin listening to Christmas music and giving presents. He can't quite find the will to complain as he stands in the kitchen with a cigarette. The kids are happy and El looks... elated. She's wearing a red dress and has a matching red headband in her hair all thanks to Joyce, who got her that and a few other outfits for Christmas. Jim tried to tell her it was too much, but she wouldn't hear of it. "The girl needs to wear more than oversized flannel and jeans!" she had said, and Hopper didn't have a good response to that.

The house is decorated like a Sears Christmas catalog threw up on it, but he also can't find anything to complain about there. After he'd brought home some decorations, El was suddenly less upset about having to keep hidden in the woods. She strung all the lights, set up the tree, and placed the rest of the decorations. They put the ornaments on the tree together and, although Hopper never will admit it, it was one of his happiest days yet.

"If you're not going to enjoy the party, why did you throw one?" Hopper looks up and sees Joyce waltz over to him. She picks his cigarette out of his hand and takes a long drag. Choking a little, she hands it back to him.

"Thought you were quitting," Hopper replies indifferently as he takes his own puff.

"After everything, I think I deserve a little Christmas present to myself," she laughs, but she doesn't reach for it again. "So?" She's prodding him and he knows it.

"I didn't throw a Christmas party," Hopper shrugs, as though the whole concept of Christmas could just jump off a cliff and he

wouldn't care. "El did." But at that, he smiles, and Joyce knows he's happy.

"Oh. Well, she did a great job." They stand there in silence, watching as Steve hooks up his Atari system to the TV. The boys shove and push for who got to play first, but the winner ends up being Max who grabs the controller while they argue. El just sits on the couch, watching curiously, but content to just enjoy the atmosphere of the party.

"She did." Hopper takes another drag of the cigarette.

"She seems happy."

"She is." He pauses. "She's getting there, at least. The nightmares are getting better, easier to deal with."

"That's good." She nudges his arm. "Come on, let's enjoy the party, Scrooge," Hopper smirks back at her, but puts out the butt of the cigarette and follows her into the living room to watch the kids play games. Max beats Dustin's high score and then Lucas tries, but can't quite get enough points either. Nancy and John are curled up on the other couch, watching while remaining as close to each other as possible. Steve steals a forlorn glance every now and then, but he's slowly getting over the pain of the breakup and is happy with coaching Dustin on the game.

"Hey, look, Chief and Ms. Byers are under the mistletoe!" Lucas calls and Dustin spins around, leaning off the back of the couch. The other kids turn and look at the adults who glance up and see the puff of green leaves in the doorway above them.

"Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" The kids chant and El looks on curiously, not understanding the old tradition. Hopper coughs to hide his embarrassment and Joyce goes bright red, but Hopper does lean down and kiss her politely on the cheek.

"Ewww!" The boys call, as though they hadn't been just chanting for just that response a minute before.

"Yeah, yeah, shut up," Hopper says. "It's ten already, get out of my

house." The kids groan, but they know it's late, so they begin to pack up.

They leave and the house is quiet again, as though a party never happened. El is helping Hopper pick up a little, but they're both tired and they know they'll leave most of it until morning.

"Hey, kid," Jim says as he flops down on the couch. El looks over curiously, but comes and sits next to him. He puts an arm around her and she tiredly leans on his shoulder. It was a long day, and she can't wait to get into bed. "I have something for you."

"A present?"

"Sorta." He reaches under the couch and comes up with a wrapped thin square. She takes it when he hands it to her and regards it curiously. It's too big to be a book but too small and not boxy enough to be a board game. "Go on, open it."

She does and inside she finds a frame, like one you'd put a picture in, but there's no picture inside it. Instead, it's a blue piece of paper with lots of words and signatures and dates on it, but the one thing she can focus on are the words at the top.

Jane Hopper

Jane, her name. Her real name, that is, the one her mother gave her. But now her mother is essentially gone and she has no use for the aunt who tried to betray her.

Hopper, the last name of the man who's taken care of her for over a year, who clothed and fed her and tried his hardest to be a guide in her life. The one who let her have this Christmas party and keeps feeding her insatiable appetite for Eggo waffles even though it's not the healthiest thing.

Jane Hopper. A connection to the past. A promise for the future.

"You don't have to go by Jane," Hopper says awkwardly when she doesn't speak for a while. "El works, though we'll need to come up with some sort of reason. Maybe that's your middle name. You know, Ella, or something."

"El Hopper," the girl whispers.

"Yeah, I mean you don't have to call me dad or anything like that, but it'll help, you know? Like get you into school and stuff. Not until next school year, still need to lay low, but next year, we'll see."

El turns to look at him with a range of emotions flashing through her face. But he sees the tears and the curve of her lips into a bright smile and he knows she's thrilled. She hugs him tight, the frame hanging precariously on her knees and he wraps her in a tight hug himself. She likes her gift, he can tell. And it's a gift for him too. The gift of a daughter. The gift of a new beginning. A second chance.

"Merry Christmas, kid."

"Merry Christmas."

Notes for the Chapter:

I figured it would be nice to break up angst with a little Christmas joy. The next two are likely to be angst, but I'll try to be nice to them too! Anyway thanks for all the kind reviews! You rock!

5. Freezing

Summary for the Chapter:

A cold front comes in, leaving a weak and sick Eleven out in the freezing snow. Hopper finds her and takes her to safety.

Eleven is cold.

Well, cold is an understatement, but El doesn't know the word "freezing," so the only thing running through her mind is how *damn cold* she is. She crouches under a tree and rubs her freezing hands together, but it doesn't help. It never helps, but she doesn't know what else to do.

She wonders where that man is. He left her waffles. She's grateful, but the cold weather closes in much quicker than she anticipated. She wishes she had a warmer coat. She's not wanting for food, but for warmth.

There's nothing she, or anyone else, can do about how quickly the cold front moved in. The average temperature was about twenty degrees for the first few weeks. Cold, but manageable. Now, a week-long frost is moving through the area and, though El doesn't know how to tell the temperature, it is nearing a perfect zero degrees. To the girl, it's just really, really freaking cold. It had come so quickly that even the residents in the town of Hawkins are dumbfounded and school has closed for a few days because of the cold.

But El doesn't go to school, nor does she understand what is really going on. All she knows is that she keeps getting colder and colder and growing more tired. She even has a few rations left over, but she can't bring herself to eat. She isn't hungry, she's tired. So, tired. When she does close her eyes, she can never tell how long they had been closed for. Sometimes it would be bright and then dark in a flash. Sometimes, the opposite. But, even though she doesn't quite know why she tries her hardest to force herself to stay awake. Something tells her closing her eyes again would be dangerous.

Dying. She knows what dying is. She was afraid of death at one point. Death means nothing, forever. No Hawkins. No Eggos. No Mike.

Mike. She wonders what Mike is doing. Is he cold, like she is? Is he curled up in his basement playing games with his Party? Does he ever think of her, does he miss her? She misses him. And warmth. And sleep.

God, sleep. She longs for it, but lately, sleep brings no relief. She blinks slowly but is determined to keep herself awake. It's a struggle, a worse struggle than she expects it to be. She can find people with her mind and levitate objects, but she can't easily keep herself awake.

And then there is wetness. She glances up at the sky and sees soft white flakes falling towards her. Snow. Snow brings water, which is good, but it also brought cold, which is bad. This is bad. It has to be.

Snowflakes fall all over her and land in her brown hair which is growing slowly. They litter her eyelashes and make them feel even heavier than before. She groans and leans her head against the tree, wishing above all else that she had warmth, a bed, food.

And then she hears it. It's faint at first and she thinks it's just a trick of her mind. But, then, as it gets louder and closer, she hears someone calling through the woods. It's a deep voice-a man's-and he sounds concerned, and El knows she needs to get away so she can keep safe, but she can't get her legs to move. It's like the snow has glued them to the ground and she is stuck there. Though, truly, in this instant, she doesn't care. Whatever happens if this person finds her has got to be better than sitting against this tree in the cold.

"Oh shit. Fuck. *Fuck*." The voice is suddenly so close now and El wonders if she drifted off again. Her eyes are half-lidded and the world is partly dark and very blurry. Is it nighttime? She can't tell. But she hears more swearing and the crunch of snow under a boot right in front of her. Did the snow fall that quickly, she wonders briefly, or did it come over time?

"Eleven? Eleven?" Her name. A light touch on her shoulder. Warmth. She leans into the touch, her guard completely down. She can't keep those walls up and stay awake at the same time. The warmth

blossoms from her shoulder and reaches just to the base of her neck. She shivers. The contrast is too much. "Can you hear me?"

Yes. But she can't speak.

"Hey, come on. Stay with me."

She's with him, as with him as she can be, but she can't move.

"Come on, we need to get you out of here."

God, that sounds like the *best* idea, but her legs don't work.

She knows there's a figure in front of her, but they're blurry and she can't focus. She feels him draw her close and she feels safe and she isn't scared. Her eyes close. She is lifted off the ground and the drifts into darkness.

Eleven is warm.

Well, warm is an understatement. She's hot, extremely hot, but it's the best she's felt in weeks. She's lying on her back on something soft and there's a heavy soft blanket on top of her. Is this death, she wonders? If so, this isn't so bad. She can finally feel every part of her body again and even if she is a little too warm, she's content.

Slowly and deliberately, she opens her eyes. They're not as heavy as they were out in the cold, so it's a little easier. A room comes into focus. It's small with not much in it, but it's nice. She's lying in a double bed. El doesn't feel like she can move much, so she only sees a dresser and a door.

She sighs and leans back against the pillow. As she does so, she hears steps and knows there's someone else here. They're the same heavy steps from the woods and they don't scare her. And then, a figure appears in the doorway. It's Hopper, the Police Chief, the man who left her food. He looks surprised that she's awake, but also relieved and there's even a flash of regret on his face.

"Hey, kid," he says softly, turning into the room. "You awake?" El watches as he sits down on the chair next to the bed, which she

notices for the first time. She can't find her voice, so she just nods in answer to his question. "Good." He places a hand on her forehead. "You're pretty sick, you know. Been out a few days."

"Sleep?" she croaks, her voice sounding foreign to her. She doesn't like it, and she certainly doesn't like how the vibrations of her voice feel like razorblades on her throat.

"Yeah, asleep for a few days." Hopper pauses. "I'm sorry. I should never have let you stay out there as long as I did. I know you wanted to be on your own and stuff. I get it. I... want to be alone sometimes too. But this cold front came in quicker than we expected. Thought it'd just be a night, then it lasted a week. I shoulda come out sooner."

"It's okay." El doesn't want to speak, but she also doesn't want him to feel bad. After all, she could have come out of the woods at any time and she didn't. If anything, she feels bad that she made him worry. She glances at the ceiling. "Where...?" God, her throat hurts. That's the best she could do with the question.

"My trailer. When you're better I've got a better place to go. You'll be safe there." El nods, though she doesn't completely understand. A trailer? A better place? Whatever. She's tired again and her eyelids flutter. Hopper laughs lightly, a forced chuckle that sounds more like a strong breath of air.

"I'm talking your ear off," he says, patting her shoulder. "You're safe, kid. I promise. Get some sleep."

Promise. El knows that word. It's something that can't be broken. She closes her eyes and drifts back to sleep. She trusts him.

El wakes hours later. Hopper is sitting at her bedside in the chair next to the bed. He's reading the paper and doesn't notice she's awake until she shifts on the bed. When he does hear the rustle of the sheets and the creak of the bed, he looks over at her, surprised, and then smiles.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" he asks.

El shrugs. "Bad," she says, but with a little bit of uncertainty. She's sure there's a way to be more descriptive, but she can't think of any other words right now. Her mind feels like mush and she wants to both sleep forever and never sleep again.

Hopper's smile turns into a concerned frown and he leans over, placing a hand on her head. She braces herself for a warm feeling but is surprised when his big calloused hand actually feels colder than her own skin. She's even disappointed when he finally pulls away and wishes she could keep that cool feeling on her skin forever. "Yeah, you've still got quite the temp, kid," Hopper confirms and he moves to stand from the chair. "Let me go get you some water and medicine, alright?"

El nods, not that she has much of a choice. She guesses the question wasn't really up for discussion, but she does wonder what medicine is. It's a familiar word, like so many, but she can't quite think of the meaning. She assumes it has something to do with water, a word she does remember, and she suddenly doesn't care what medicine is so long as she can finally quench her thirst.

Hopper is only gone for a few minutes, but it feels like an eternity and Eleven struggles to keep herself from falling back asleep. He returns to a half-conscious girl lying still in the bed, her eyelids half open and her breaths coming out in short puffs. He places the medicine and water down on the nightstand and places a hand on El's shoulder.

"Alright, let's get you sitting up."

She knows he wants her to move against the pillow propped up against the headboard, but she can't feel her arms or legs. He seems to realize this and lifts her up from under her arm. She's so light and thin--so incredibly thin from being out there for so long--that it's like lifting a feather off the ground. He takes the medicine, a medium-sized red bottle, and a spoon and pours a little of the sticky red liquid onto it. El regards it cautiously, but she's also too tired to care.

"Alright, just one little spoonful of this and then all the water you can

drink, okay?" Hopper asks slowly. "And, uh. It might not taste good."

El just shrugs indifferently and Hopper lifts the spoon to her mouth. She leans forward and takes the whole dose and, oh *God* does she regret that. Her face contorts as she struggles to swallow the liquid but her throat closes suddenly on her and she has to try and pry it open. The medicine feels like goop and tastes like slime that is trying to be sweet, but it's almost sickly-diseased even-and it likely would have been better off not being sweetened at all.

"It's okay, it's okay. Just swallow," Hopper is telling her as he reaches for the glass of water. She is finally able to and she doesn't even need his help with the glass-she just grabs it and chugs. Had it been any other situation, Hopper would have laughed at how desperate she was to get the taste out of her mouth, but he stays stoic and watches until the glass is empty.

"Bad!" El tells him at the same time as she gasps for air. "Bad!"

"I know, but it will help." God, how many times has Hopper done this? He remembers Sara, so sick, but still refusing to take her medicine because her eight-year-old brain didn't understand. Like El, she didn't know why she was so sick, just that it was and that it hurt and *why* couldn't Daddy make the pain go away?

"It'll help," Hopper whispers, softly this time, and helps El lay back down. "I know it sucks, but you have to trust me. Okay? Trust?"

El regards him for a minute. The medicine was awful-beyond awful, even-but he means well. He even looks a little pained at the idea that she doesn't trust him. She reaches over and weakly touches his hand. "Trust," she whispers.

He smiles, and she's asleep again. She falls in and out of sleep for the next week. Sometimes Hopper is there when she wakes up and sometimes he isn't. He says he needs to go to work most days, but he'll be back, and he always is. At least, she thinks he is, but she can't tell the time and even if she could, there's no clock in the room. And even if she had a clock, she falls asleep at the drop of a hat anyway, so she wouldn't have any idea.

As the days go on, however, she's able to stay awake for longer periods of time and in just a few days, she's able to get solid food down without throwing it back up.

One morning Hopper sits at her bedside, drinking coffee and reading the paper. El has just woken up from a full, actual night of sleep, and they've talked about trying for a nap in mid-afternoon, then going to bed at a regular time.

"Hey, kid?" Hopper says, still looking at his paper. El looks back at him curiously. He slowly folds the paper and places it on the nightstand before leaning forward in the chair with his hands folded. "You're not... wanting to go back out, are you? By yourself?"

El thinks on the question and realizes that the thought has never crossed her mind in the week she's been at Hopper's. "No," she replies simply.

"Good." He looks relieved. "You know, you can stay with me."

"Stay with you?" Hopper nods. El's lips turn upwards. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah. You're nice. Not bad. You helped me." She shrug. "And, it's warm here."

"You were out there so long. You know you coulda come in at any time." Hopper frowns, guilt appearing on his face. "I should have come sooner."

The girl looks away. "Scared," she says. "I didn't know you wanted me." Hopper looks like he's about to protest, but he decides against it. Even he can admit that he can seem off-putting.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Don't think I don't want you. I want you to be safe, and I think you're safer here. With me."

"Safe." El smiles, a real smile this time. "Yeah."

Hopper matches her's with his own smile. "I'll keep you safe, kid. I promise."

Promise. There's that word again. "Promise," she tests the word on her lips. "Something you can't ever break."

"Yeah, kid. And I won't. I won't ever break my promise to you."

El leans back against the pillows. She is safe. She is warm. She is fed. And, she realizes, that friends make promises, so she must have a friend now. Her first friend since she left Mike. "Friends?" she asks him.

"Yeah," he replies, amused. "Friends."

She exhales a long breath and feels herself relax. She needed time in the woods alone, but now she's happy to have Hopper there to help her, to take care of her. She's just a little girl after all, no matter what she's seen or done. And she's grateful for that. El knows that Hopper doesn't see her as a tool or an experiment, but as a child, one that needs protection and care. And, sure, he might be awkward and he might have the absolute *shittiest* medicine on earth, but he tries, and she's grateful for that. For the first time in a long time, she feels safe and wanted. She has a friend.

Hopper watches her for a moment before going back to his paper, but his mind doesn't register the words he's reading. He's thinking about how lucky he is that he got to her in time, that she's still there. He's in awe at how much she's gone through, all she's seen, and yet how she still looks like a young girl. And, he's sad, because he wishes Sara could be with him now to help and guide him as she likely would have had she never gotten sick. But, he knows, as he sets down the paper and reaches into the nightstand drawer, that this is her gift to him-his second chance.

He grabs a green hard covered book and El watches him curiously. "This was my daughter's favorite story," he says. "Wanna read it together?"

She nods. He opens the book, licks his pointer finger, and flips to the first page.

"Mrs. Rachel Lynde lived just where the Avonlea main road dipped down into a little hollow, fringed with alders and ladies' eardrops and

traversed by a brook that had its source away back in the woods of the old Cuthbert place..."

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, thank you for all the love! This one has been my favorite to write so far and I hope you enjoy it as well! It's really hard for me not to write angst, so my next one is going to be angsty too but I'll come up with happier stories soon! Promise!

6. Nightmares

Summary for the Chapter:

El has some bad nights after closing The Gate. This is one of those nights.

Hopper can't tell what, exactly, he anticipated from the girl that went to hell and back. He had known from the start of this crazy, unbelievable journey that things won't be exactly "normal" for a kid who was little more than an experiment for the first thirteen years of her life. And he knows that it will take time and effort to watch her, raise her as his own daughter. But for whatever reason, he hasn't considered that El is still, at heart, a little girl. There is a reason she needs a dad and one of those reasons was because of the nightmares.

Oh God, the nightmares.

When Hopper first brings El home, she is too sick and far too tired for nightmares. But now, a week later, she's on a more regular schedule-asleep by ten, up by eight-and it's right when that regularity starts that the nightmares do too.

Jim is startled out of his sleep by a high pitched scream and he fumbles in the dark to find the light switch. It's amazing how, in his dazed and confused state, he completely forgets where the switch is on the old, antique light on the equally as old wooden nightstand. Finally, after what feels like an hour, he finds it, just as there's another loud scream and wailing from the other room. He knows it's El and he flings himself up and out the door of his room and into hers.

The first thing he notices is that she's not in the bed, but he knows she's in the room because she's still screaming. He glances down and finds her wedged between the wall and her dresser, her legs pulled up tight to her chest and her hands covering her head. In the dim light, he can see a dark smudge under her nose and he knows she's bleeding. He wants to get a washcloth if for no other reason than to get away from the screams, but he knows better and takes a step forward.

"El," he says dumbly. Of course, his normal speaking voice is no match for the wild swinging sword that is her's. He wants to shout her down, but he knows he needs to handle this gently. How does one shout gently, he wonders. How do I be a dad again?

He kneels, his ears turning deaf to the screams. They continue, but they no longer bother him. Slowly, he crawls on the floor the few feet over to her and touches her hand. He doesn't grab her because he doesn't want to startle her more and he is grateful when she doesn't attack the touch.

"El," he says, louder this time. "Hey, hey, it's me. It's me. Hopper. Jim."

"No!" El screams at the top of her lungs and Hopper finds himself glad, for the first time, that they're in the middle of the woods. If they had neighbors, they surely would have been awake by now. And she keeps screaming, and she rocks back and forth with her hands over her ears and her face buried in her knees.

And that's when Jim realizes that talking her down from this isn't going to work, if for no other reason than because she can't even hear him. So, he reaches forward and he grabs her, pulling the ball that is the kid-his kid-tightly to his chest. It's in that moment that the screaming stops, but she doesn't unwrap herself quite yet. Hopper places a hand on her back. He'll wait. As long as this episode takes, he'll wait.

Slowly, El brings herself back to reality, which is quite the task because she was very far away when he grabbed her back. It's dark, and El has grown to hate the darkness. Darkness means she can't see far in front of her and it also means she's often left alone. Alone in this dark house, alone in that dark room. She feels like she's sinking and the raft is just out of reach.

But then Hopper is there and the raft comes back and she opens herself up just enough to grab his shirt like her life depends on it. She vaguely aware of the tears streaming down her cheeks, but she is more sensitive to the feeling of bushy, prickly hair on her forehead and a hand rubbing circles around her back. She wants to close her eyes and truly feel the calming sensations around her, but she also

doesn't dare because then she'll be sucked back into the hell she just came out of.

After a while-what feels like a half hour, maybe, but Hopper can't tell--El's sobs die down into whimpers. He doesn't know if it's because she is feeling better or if her voice has just given out on her and she has no more tears to give. Either way, now that he can be heard, he takes the chance to say some calming words to her that he hopes reaches her. Stuff like, "It's okay." and "I'm here, you're okay," along with other phrases and soft tones that just a month ago he never imagined himself saying.

Then, she stops and is silent for a long time, and Hopper can't tell if she's asleep again or just quiet. She's buried so far into his chest that he can't see if her eyes are open or not, but the grip on his shirt is as tight as it's been since she grabbed it.

"Hey kid?" he asks once his back starts hurting and he begins to long for his bed. If she's asleep, he might as well put her back to bed. But, she's not and she looks up at him. Her face is red and puffy with wet tears still lingering around her eyes and on her cheeks. The only part of her that doesn't look bright red is the part under her eyes, which are a deep purple. There's also her brown eyes which look so much browner than ever since the redness of her eyes and face creates a stark contrast.

"What happened?" Hopper finds himself questioning, though he doesn't know if now's the time for that given her reaction to whatever it was.

"Bad dream," she whispers, her voice hoarse and scratchy. Her nose seems plugged up and her voice sounds deeper than he'd ever heard it. "Bad, bad dream."

"A nightmare?"

El looks at him with a confused expression on her face. The word sounds familiar, and she guesses it's the correct word for what just happened to her. Hopper just nods and he spells it out for her, though it seems like hardly the moment to teach her vocabulary. "It's what you just had, a bad dream."

"A nightmare." The word, El decides, sounds correct. Even having it rest on her lips fills her with dread and the sound of the syllables together seem dark, so she figured it's an appropriate word. "Yeah. That."

"Nightmares aren't real," Hopper tells her. "Sometimes they can be about the past, and the past can be scary, but that's still the past. You're here now. You're safe. Whatever you see while you sleep, it isn't real."

"Not real." El pauses. "But scary."

"Yeah, still scary."

He thinks to ask her what she saw in her dream, but he decides against it. Of course, he doesn't want to put her through that again, but he also doesn't really want to know. Whatever it is, it's not the typical, kid being chased by a clown nightmare normal children have. No, this dream probably went further than even some of Hopper's own worst fears.

"Come on, let's get you back to bed."

"No!" Despite how hoarse her voice was, El still found the strength to shout at him. She pushed away, but Hopper held her still and she didn't fight the hands on her back.

"Okay, okay. But it's late, you can't stay up until morning."

"I bet I could..."

"Yeah, and then what? Never sleep again?" Hopper notices a flash on El's face like that's the best idea she's heard and he sighs. "No, you can't actually do that." Her face falls. "Look, just get into the bed. You don't have to sleep, but you can't sit on the floor either."

"And you?" Her voice is small again and she seems almost scared of what he's going to say. Hopper can't tell what she's getting at, so he decides to answer honestly.

"I'm, uh, gonna go back to bed."

"Can you, uh..." She tries to find the words. They're right there and she knows them, but she's so tired now and stringing them together is hard. "Stay?"

"Can I stay?" Hopper repeats, as though the words have lost all meaning and he's trying to find it again. He glances at the bed. It's small and old, but it should be enough for the both of them. "Alright, kid. But then you have to try to get back to sleep."

El nods enthusiastically. She's not excited about going back to bed-far from it, in fact. But, she feels safer with Hopper there. She knows that she's the last line of defense the world has right now from the Upside Down, but she still needs someone to protect her too.

They climb into bed. It's a tight squeeze, but neither minds, especially as El folds right into his side. Hopper lays on his back, staring at the ceiling. He vaguely remembers laying like this with Sara when she was very little and feels a pain in his heart as he also remembers the first few nights in the hospital which were filled with night terrors. But, as he feels El shift next to him, he does his best to push away the sadness. He reaches one hand over to the other and gently touches the blue hair tie. This is his second chance, and he thanks Sara for the gift she's given him every day.

El immediately falls asleep. Hopper does too after about fifteen minutes. For both of them, it's the best sleep they've gotten since coming home.

Notes for the Chapter:

I've had this story written for about a week, but realized I was writing a ton of angst so I wrote the last two chapters! I have a problem, okay? It's like my brain just knows angst. Anyway, I'm working on a Thanksgiving one now (tis the turkey season, bitches!) and if anyone has suggestions or prompts, feel free to send them my way!

7. Thanksgiving

Summary for the Chapter:

The first Thanksgiving after The Gate is closed is quiet and uneventful. They are more thankful for that simple fact than anything else, except, perhaps, each other.

Thanksgiving creeps up on the tiny town in a way it never has before. Even Hopper is surprised when he turns on the news first thing in the morning to hear the anchor cheerfully call out, "Be sure to get your turkeys ordered for Thanksgiving this Thursday!" It feels like it's coming so soon, but he knows deep down that it's coming around the same time as it does every year. The only thing that has changed is him.

And he knows the rational response would be to call Joyce and see what she might want to do, if she even wants to do anything at all. Thinking about the past few weeks, about Bob, about how downright *unfair* this whole month has been makes Hopper angry. How *dare* Thanksgiving come so soon after all that has happened. How dare it try to make them pretend that all is well and that their lives haven't been turned upside down.

"Work?" A voice calls from the other side of the cabin and Hopper turns, aware for the first time that his hands are clenched into tight fists. He softens at the sight of the girl, small and leaning on the doorframe.

"Yeah, gotta go to work," He says as he reaches for his coat. "How're you feeling?" Coming back after closing the gate was one of the toughest parts of the whole thing. For a week she was practically bedridden and she'd only just gotten on a regular schedule. Hopper doesn't want to leave her alone now, but he has to. She's got to lay low for a little while longer.

"Better," El shrugs, indifferent to her own recovery. She's not happy when the man leaves. "Five-one-five?"

"I promise." He walks over and gives her hair a good tussle. It's curly and getting long; it's even longer than he remembers. He'll have to ask Joyce about girl hairstyles and the like, but right now he has to head off to work. "I'll bring us home some burgers okay?"

El smiles at that. "Yes."

Work is boring.

No, that's an understatement. Work is dull, tedious, monotonous, and just downright *stupid* and Hopper spends all his time trying to think of a word that's worse than just plain "boring," but falls short. Whatever that word is, wherever it is out there, *that* is how he's feeling about work.

Then again, it's difficult to come back after fighting interdimensional monsters and not find being a simple Police Chief a little mundane. To make matters worse, there's not a single complaint or issue in the whole damn town. Not a neighbor dispute, not a domestic, not even a simple parking ticket.

So, when his phone rings suddenly, he's jostled into an upright sitting position from the relaxed feet-on-desk one he was just in. He calms his beating heart, grabs the phone, and jams his elbow onto the desk.

"Chief Hopper," he greets gruffly.

"Oh, Jim, good. Glad I caught you." The voice on the other end sounds crackly thanks to the connection, but also weary and tired, though no less happy to talk.

"Joyce?"

"Of course. Hey, I was wondering, what are your plans for Thursday?"

"Uh. Work?" What kind of game is this? "Why?"

"They're making the Police Chief work on Thanksgiving?" He can practically hear her smirk through the phone. "Or are you just that dedicated to the force?" And, as aggravated at her veiled teasing as he is, he suddenly remembers a simple fact he knew just a few hours

before-Thursday is Thanksgiving.

Oh, who cares?

"Then I won't be at work," he shrugs. "Again. Why?"

"Well, Will's still recovering a little, otherwise I'd suggest going over to your place, but why don't we have Thanksgiving together? If El's up for it, that is. I've invited the other kids over for dessert later in the evening, but I can make a turkey for the five of us."

Hopper thinks on this for a minute, though he's really just stuck on one part of her plan. "Wait, the only thing keeping you from inviting your family over to my house is your son being sick? That's it?"

"Oh, Jim," she laughs, but doesn't address his question. "So? What do you say? Be at my house at noon?"

"I don't know, Joyce..."

"Come on, you both need it."

"I think we'll be alright."

"I could use the company."

Shit. Hopper sighs. Joyce is a smart woman, she knows exactly what she's doing. But, Hopper realizes, he doesn't mind so much. It might seem like a crappy way to get someone to come over, but Joyce knows him better than he'd like to admit. She's doing this because he and El really, truly, need a nice meal surrounded by friends and family.

Of course, he can't let her know how grateful he is for a friend like her.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. I guess we can swing by."

El is ecstatic to get out of the house, even if only for a day. She doesn't really understand what Thanksgiving is. Mike says it's something about people on boats and eating turkey, but a day where

Hopper is off and everyone is together is a good day in her book.

Jim won't admit that he's glad to spend Thanksgiving with someone. He hasn't spent that day with anyone since his daughter died and he thought he was alright with that, but things have changed. Now, he has El and friends and some weird ass little family of sorts that includes four boys, some random girl, three teenagers, and Joyce. No, he won't admit any of that, but he does buy El a simple, but pretty, maroon colored dress to wear to Thanksgiving. Dresses, he figures, are simple enough, but he might have to ask Joyce or Nancy or even Max about other kinds of clothes that aren't dresses and also aren't oversized flannel.

"What is Thanksgiving?" Eleven asks as she's slipping into her coat. Hopper is grabbing a case of beer out of the fridge, his offering to the host for the meal. He shrugs, not making eye contact, and crosses the room to grab his own heavy jacket. It's cold outside now, much colder than it has been the past week or so. Winter is absolutely upon them.

"We've been over this, kid," Hopper says, grabbing his keys off the table as he glances at the clock. 12:01. Shit, they're going to be late. "Taught you all the words and everything. What do you remember?"

"Thanksgiving," El ponders as she leans against the wall by the door, waiting for Hopper to be finally ready to go. "It's thankfulness. Which means being happy for things." She seems uncertain and looks up at the man as he hurries to the door. He throws it open and ushers her out into the cold and over to the truck.

"Yeah," he confirms, remembering she offered an answer to his question. "Close enough." El still has a lot of questions. Why do we celebrate Thanksgiving? What are people usually thankful for? Why do we eat turkey? But she's shoved into the car and before she knows it, Hopper is peeling out of the driveway.

El crosses her arm and leans back into the passenger's seat. "Are you thankful?" she asks, glancing over at him. Hopper shrugs. He shrugs a lot, she notices. She wonders if it's because he doesn't know things or if it's a total reflex at this point.

"Yeah. Yeah, kid I am," he says as he pulls up to a stop sign.

"Why?"

This kid has more questions than a two-year-old, Hopper thinks to himself with another shrug as he makes a left turn. "I just am. You can just be thankful for things in general, you know? Glad to be alive. Glad to have a job." He steals a glance at her, but not for too long because he needs to keep his eyes on the road. "Glad you're here."

"Me? Why?"

"Well, kid, you scared me quite a bit with the whole, closing an interdimensional portal thing a few weeks ago. I thought..." He pauses, his words catching up to his emotions and he suddenly feels an overwhelming sense of dread. "I thought I was gonna lose you," he finishes in a quieter voice.

El looks out the window, not liking the uncomfortable feeling that is bubbling in her stomach. It feels like a mix of anxiety and guilt. Anxiety for what could have happened, guilt for making Hopper feel that same sense of dread. "No," she says. "I'm here. I'm staying." Her jaw is set, she's determined. Hopper steals another glance at her as he approaches a traffic light and he smiles.

"Yeah? Good."

They make it to Joyce's house fifteen minutes later and she nags them about being late and then laughs when she finds out it was Hopper who took the extra time getting ready. El rats him out real quick.

"You look so pretty," Joyce says kindly as she returns to the kitchen to check on the food. El smiles. Pretty. She knows that word and she likes it very much.

"Thank you," she says as Will comes out of his room, a wide smile on his face.

"El!" he says and the girl turns over to him. There is the boy that she not once but twice has saved from the Upside Down. He looks a little pale, but he's recovering well and she's happy to see him up and moving. She wonders about him, what he's really like, who he really

is. She's saved him twice but barely knows him.

"Hi, Will," she says shyly. The adults watch on with smiles on their faces as the kids get acquainted.

"Hey, mom bought me some new colored pencils. Wanna help me draw some pictures?" Will asks and El brightens.

"Sure!"

They scamper off and Hopper hangs around in the kitchen. "Uh, thanks for inviting us," he says awkwardly after a few minutes. Joyce, who's bustling around the kitchen, turns and flashes him a smile.

"Not a problem. I figured you wouldn't have any plans so soon after, well, everything. So, I wanted to make sure you had someone to spend Thanksgiving with." Hopper just nods and cracks open a beer just as the oven goes off. "Oh, good it's done! Alright, let's get everything set up and ready!"

They call the kids who all come and set the table. Will and El happily help out and so does Jonathan, who has begun to take a much more active role in the family. Plus, he's pretty excited to see Nancy later that evening.

They enjoy their Thanksgiving meal, and Hopper finds himself glad that he took Joyce up on her offer. El seems elated, happier than she's been in... in... well, ever, really. She and Will are chatting up a storm, even with her limited vocabulary. Jonathan actively talks to both the kids and the adults, and Hopper is glad to discuss what it takes to be on the police force since Jonathan is trying to figure out his life and is curious about different paths. After learning about it, he figures he'll just stick to photography.

The food is eaten, the pie is in the oven, and around five that evening more people start to roll in. First is Nancy who brings Mike, and Mike is extremely happy to see that Eleven is there. The three run off to Will's room and Jonathan takes Nancy to his room *while keeping the door open*, Joyce reminds them with a wink.

Lucas appears next with Max. They'd taken Lucas's bike after Lucas

helped Max ditch her family's party. And then, last but not least, Dustin shows up with Steve in tow, having used the older kid for a ride.

And then they all sit back at the table, eating pie and cookies and sharing what had happened to them in the weeks since the closing of The Gate. El is fuller than she thinks she's ever been in her entire life, both by means of food and by the love in her heart for all the people gathered there that day.

Of course, as these things tend to, it all ends far too soon. Nancy takes Mike back, and Lucas needs to get Max to her house, and Steve figured it's about time to head out with Dustin as well. The sun has set and the dishes are clean, so Hopper figures it's about time to leave too.

El is silent on the ride home, but a smile lingers on her face. Hopper glances at her as he stops at a light, noting how the streetlight shines on her face. "Hey, kid?" he asks.

"Yeah?" she asks sleepily.

"What're you thankful for?" She looks at him in confusion. "You know, *Thanks*-giving and all."

She connects the words in her tired, food-filled mind and smiles. "Oh." She pauses. "I'm thankful for... For friends. Joyce. You."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. You a bunch."

Hopper smiles. "What are you thankful for?" she asks him.

"You, kid. I'm thankful for you."

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy almost Thanksgiving! As always, thanks so much for all the love of my stories! It means SO

much to me! I also take requests, so let me know if there's anything you'd like me to write. To the reader who requested the "boyfriend talk" for Mike, I'm in the process of editing that, and will be the next thing uploaded unless a muse bites me and I pop something else out faster!

8. Boyfriends

Summary for the Chapter:

El and Mike go on their first real date. Hopper is a little less than excited.

“No funny business, you got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you’re only going to the movies, not a single place but there.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you better not get too close. Leave room for Jesus, got it?”

“Ugh! Dad!”

The tall, gruff man glances over at his daughter who is sitting on the couch with her arms crossed defiantly in front of her. She’s sitting next to her friend. Her *boyfriend*, Hopper unwillingly reminds himself. He’s known the kid for years, but that was when the boy was just a *friend* and not a *boyfriend*, as he is now. Apparently, they’ve decided they are “dating” and the Police Chief can’t say he’s exactly jumping for joy.

“Don’t even try, kid,” he tells El, a pretty young woman just barely fifteen years old. Her brown eyes are as wild and untamed as her curly hair that reaches just below her shoulders and, thanks to Nancy’s fashion advice, she’s wearing a knee-length denim skirt with a matching denim jacket over her pink blouse.

“You’re scaring him,” she tells her father, looking over at brown haired boy next to her. His eyes are wide and he’s just nodding along with everything anyone says, hoping to get out of the house alive.

“Good,” Hopper replies smugly as he straightens up. “Look, if you kids think you’re ‘dating’ now, then I’m gonna treat you like you’re dating.”

"If I may." A woman steps forward, forgotten in the back of the room, though a smile lingered on her lips. Nancy couldn't say she didn't enjoy watching her brother squirm under Chief Hopper's gaze. "I'll be there the whole time. I won't let them get up to anything you wouldn't like. And, it's just a movie after all."

Jim looks over and regards her critically, though nothing on his face gives away what his final evaluation is. He just grunts indifferently and turns back to the kids, his daughter looking bored and aggravated, and Mike still looking for an escape plan.

"We're going to be late if we don't go," El says impatiently, scooting to the edge of the couch as she grabs Mike's hand. Hopper is less than pleased with that minimal display of affection, but he doesn't say anything. Something about El's tone is getting to him and he realizes that he just wants her to be safe. Everything in Hawkins has been quiet lately, but, if he's learned anything over the past few years, quiet is usually your last warning before something blows up.

"Alright, fine," he relents as the kids practically bounce off the couch and grab their coats. Hopper notes that Mike helps El into hers first and he smiles. The kid isn't all that bad. Alright, the kid isn't bad at all, but he's only had his daughter for a few years now and she's grown up so quickly. He missed all her firsts, missed raising her for the first thirteen years of life. Watching her stand and walk out the door--and on a *date* no less--is difficult.

But then El comes over and gives her dad a hug and Hopper completely melts, as he always does.

"Be back soon," she says before rushing towards the door.

"Be safe."

"I will be!"

They're just about to head out when Hopper steps forward and shouts to Mike, "Have her home by nine."

"I'm the one who's driving!" Nancy calls as a reminder and pushes the young couple out the door.

Notes for the Chapter:

So sorry for the delay in updates, like I said in my other ST story, life has been super crazy. Hopefully, I'll pick up steam! I'm working on the next story (which will be longer!) where El finds Hopper's yearbook in the cabin, and after that I have nothing planned so any and all ideas are very welcome! Thank you for all your wonderful support!

9. The Yearbook

It's a quiet morning in late Spring when El finds it. It's a wonder she hasn't already come across it in the small cabin, but her favorite show just ended for the season and she's bored out of her skull. It's not quite time for her to leave the cabin, but also not quite time for school to be out, so the days that Hopper goes to work are boring. Hiding away is more bearable now that her friends visit frequently, but there's nothing El can do about their school schedule.

She finds the old dusty book in a box up on the top shelf of a cabinet tucked in the corner. It's as if the whole section of the cabin has been forgotten, as silly as it seems in the tiny space, but El's eyes fill with wonder as she picks it up. She'd gone exploring in the cabinet and found the box, and was now picking through its contents. The book doesn't look very different from the others, but the familiar name of the local high school catches her eye.

It's a crimson book with gold lettering and El slowly reads the title. *Hawkins Senior High School Yearbook... 1960*. El can read the word "yearbook" but she doesn't quite know what it means. She'll have to ask Hopper about it later.

She opens the book and is greeted with a large puff of dust. The girl sneezes, careful to turn herself away from the old book and she uses her other hand to wave away the dust cloud. She remembers the dust clouds that filled the old cabin the first few days after she and Hopper moved in, and she wonders how long it has been since this book was touched. As she leafs through the crisp, perfectly flat pages, she assumes it's been a while, if it was ever touched in the first place.

She gazes at the pictures and their captions, though she can't read some of the large words and doesn't understand many compounds or colloquialisms like "Cheerleading Squad" and "Forensics Team." But, still, she feels a sense of longing as page after page of smiling teenagers stare back at her. It's a strange feeling, and she doesn't know why she feels a knot in her stomach when she thinks about what it would be like to go to school like them. It's something like jealousy, not that she knows the word itself, and she feels sad that she has never gotten the chance to go to school like these kids. She

wonders briefly if she ever will.

El turns the page and finds herself looking at rows upon rows of smiling, posed faces. These pictures are so different from the ones at the beginning of the book and she finds she doesn't like them as much. They're too fake, too crafted. The other pictures show kids laughing, having fun, and being with friends, while these are just snapshots of a painted on smile.

Still, though, she skims the pages, eyes glancing over names that she doesn't take the time to read. But, then they land on a picture of a young man who looks so strikingly familiar, that she can't help but spell out the name.

"J-A-M-E-S," El whispers aloud to herself, pointer finger tracing each letter of the name. "James." Yes, that sounds right. "H-O-P-P..." She pauses, staring at the name and then back at the picture again. "Hopper. James Hopper."

That's why he looks so familiar. She brushes the picture lightly with her thumb, removing a bit of dust that has clung to the glossy surface. That's Chief Hopper. Which, she realizes, makes quite a bit of sense. After all, if this book comes from the high school, it would be more strange for Hopper to have an old yearbook that he's not in.

For another few minutes, she examines every part of the picture with determined eyes. He's facing left, but his head is turned to the right and he's not quite smiling, but his lips are curved just the tiniest bit upwards. He has more hair and tall hair at that, and he's wearing what looks like a suit or a tux with a bowtie. El has no idea what color his hair is or if the suit and bowtie are totally black or just a darker color because the picture is in black and white, like all the others. But, she can imagine, and she's determined to remember this picture.

She notices the woman next to him, Joyce... Horowitz? The first name is easy enough, but the last name gives her trouble, and she's not sure if that's Will's mom since it looks so much like her, but the name is wrong. El decides she'll ask Hopper when he comes home.

She flips through a few more pages and reaches the last one. It's

blank, save for one little note in the top left corner, written in curvey pretty letters and with I's dotted with hearts.

To my dearest Jim. All the best, Joyce."

Joyce. Again that name, though this time it's written larger with a big looping cursive J and a Y that connects straight to the C. It's written on its own line and then below the name is a heart with a tail and pushes further down the page. El stares at this for a long while too and she wonders if this is the same Joyce that Hopper's picture is next to a few pages back. She gets the feeling it is.

Suddenly, the front door slams and El jumps, slapping the book shut on reflex. She scrambles up, throws the yearbook on the end table next to the couch, and hurries over to the door.

"Sorry, I'm late, kid, got held up at work and then some dumbass-I mean dumb person decided to do ten under the speed limit the whole way home," Hopper says as he kicks off his boots and shrugs out of his jacket. He takes the big coat and throws it over a chair haphazardly instead of hanging it up on the hooks next to the door.

Late. Huh, El must have lost track of time because she doesn't feel sad that he was gone longer than expected. So, she just shrugs and gives him a hug. Hopper returns it, glad that she isn't mad at him. "So, how was your day?" he asks the girl and El grins up at him. She scampers off for a moment, only to return with the yearbook. Proudly, she holds it up to him.

"Year. Book." She pauses. "Yearbook." Yes, that sounds better smooshed together. "Yours?" It comes out as a question, but she already knows the answer. Of course, it's Hoppers; it's in his cabin after all.

Hopper is thrown off guard and he takes the book he hasn't laid eyes on in years. "Oh," he says dryly, leafing halfheartedly through the pages. "Yeah, that's my yearbook. It's a big book of pictures from high school. You know, for memories."

Memories. El doesn't have many memories that she hasn't tried to block out. But the kids in that book look like they have memories

they *do* want to keep and look back on.

"Will I have a yearbook?" she asks and Hopper shrugs. He's not even begun to think about enrolling her in school at all nevermind her graduating and getting a yearbook of her own. But, he recognizes a glint in her eye and knows that she's longing for something good to hold onto, so he quickly morphs his shrug into a nod.

"Yeah, kid. Someday," he says and hands the book back to her, hoping that is the end of her questions about the thing. But, she instead opens it back up to the page with all the posed pictures and shows it to him again.

"You," she says, pointing to his picture.

"Oh yeah. Yup, that's me, penguin suit and all."

El scrunches up her nose, not knowing what a penguin suit is, but she decides not to ask. She has another question that's more important. Sliding her thumb over to the next photo, she taps on the glossy page. "Joyce?" She then flips to the back and points to the single note on the last page. "Joyce?"

Hopper again takes the book and looks at the note he hasn't seen in years. Joyce was the only person to sign his yearbook and the only person he had wanted a signature from. "Yeah," he says in a low, breathy voice. "Joyce."

"Our Joyce?"

'Our Joyce.' Ours, like the woman belongs to the both of them. And, after all that has happened, Hopper figures she does in the same way they both belong to the rest of the group that has saved Hawkins more than this little town ever thought it would need to be saved. Ours. Like Joyce belongs to El just as much as she belongs to Hopper because, though she and Hopper have history, El has saved Joyce's son twice and the girl looks up to the woman more than she's ever said.

"Yeah. That one."

"Pretty."

Hopper looks at the picture for a moment. "Yeah. Pretty, isn't she?"

"Why?" El asks and then stops as she considers what words she needs to use to get her question across. "Joyce wrote in your book. Yearbook."

"Why did she write in it?" Hopper asks. El nods. "It's just something people do. Well, it's what friends do, and Joyce was... is my friend, so she wrote me a little note."

El doesn't quite understand the nuances of yearbook signing, but she figures that his explanation makes about as much sense as anything else. She also has many more questions about the yearbook, why it's signed, and what Hopper and Joyce were like when they were younger, but Hopper speaks before she can string the words together.

"Alright, enough of the old yearbook. Let's get something to eat." He's making his way to the kitchen, and when he gets there, he pulls out two frozen meals. El doesn't follow immediately, but her stomach growls and she finds herself pretty hungry, so she decides to place the yearbook on the end table and head into the kitchen.

As they eat, Hopper is grateful El has stopped asking about the book. He doesn't really know why he kept it, but also can't bring himself to throw it out. In the interest of steering the conversation away from the distant past, he tells El about his day in as much detail as he can possibly push into a boring workday with only a few calls.

El doesn't ask about the yearbook again that night, but after Hopper sends her to bed, he finds himself flipping through the pages on the couch as the dim lamplight illuminates the pages. He lingers on Joyce's picture for a few more minutes than he'd ever admit and then studies the note at the back of the book. Briefly, he wonders if her handwriting is still the same.

When his eyes grow tired and his heart weary from the walk down memory lane, he shelves the old book and goes to bed. It's amazing to look at their faces, so young and full of potential. The Jim and Joyce of the 1960 Hawkins Yearbook had no idea what the future would hold. They had no idea that they would suffer love and loss and fight supernatural beings from another dimension. Everything back then

was so simple; go to school, do your homework, bum a cigarette behind the bleachers.

Now, things aren't so simple, and there are a lot of things Hopper wishes he could go back and change, or at least have a little control over. But, still, he's glad. Glad to be here, right now with El fast asleep and safe in the other room. Glad that Joyce is getting on the path to happiness and that her son is safe as well. And glad that he thinks Joyce is still pretty because she is.

Maybe, he thinks before falling asleep, maybe he should tell her that sometime.

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, thank you for your support even after I've been gone for so long! I loved the idea someone gave me about the yearbook, so I had to write it! I also see the request for an argument and I'll write that eventually, but I need to be in the right mood because it makes me sad when they fight haha! If you have a request, please feel free to let me know and I'll write it as best I can!

*As a note, the "Forensics" team is basically a fancy way of saying Speech and Debate Team. I did forensics for 6 1/2 years in high school and into college, so shout out to any fellow speechies!

10. Sick (Part 2)

Summary for the Chapter:

Hopper is sick and El struggles to figure out what to do.

"It's just a cold," he had said at the beginning of the week as he wiped his nose with the back of his sleeve. El knew something was wrong by the scratchiness in his voice that made him sound like someone else entirely. It was unsettling, because every time he spoke, she thought a stranger had come into the old cabin hidden in the woods.

"You're cold?" she asked, not quite understanding the phrase Hopper used. Her head was tilted and her lips parted slightly as the question lingered in the air. She had part of a waffle on her fork and she sat at the card table in the kitchen opposite Hopper, who elected to just have some orange juice.

"No." He shook his head. "I have a cold. I'm sick."

Oh, sick. El knew sick. "Like I was?" she asked.

"Yes." The girl looked concerned. "Well, no. Not as bad. A cold is like sick but not as bad. Get it? Word of the day. There. Done. Now eat up." He hoped that would be the end of her questioning and was thankful when it was. He didn't want the girl to worry about him, and he also didn't want to talk more than he had to. It was early, but his throat had already gone from being just slightly uncomfortable to hurting everytime he talked. If God gave a damn about him, there wouldn't be many calls at the office.

El finished, he cleaned up, and then he was gone for another day at the police station.

That had been at the beginning of the week. Although Hopper promised he was going to be just fine, it turned out he just slowly got worse as the days passed by. El tried to ask about it, but she ran out of ways to say, "Are you still sick?" and Hopper ran out of ways to tell her that he "isn't freaking sick" and eventually they both just dropped

it.

But, that Friday, Jim couldn't get himself out of bed and he had El stretch the phone cord all the way to his room so he could call out sick. It wasn't something he wanted to do. He preferred to save his sick days for when El needed him, but he knew he wouldn't last a minute at the office.

"Hawkins Police Department, Flo speaking."

"Sick," Hopper choked out as though every letter was agony to say.

There was a long pause before he heard a sharp gasp of breath on the crackling line and Flo chuckled. "Caught a bug did ya, Chief?" she asked. "Alright, see you next week then. Let me know if you're still out Monday." Hopper grunted in response and hung up the phone. He forgot El was standing there to take it and dropped it on the ground, and the looping white cord dragged it part of the way back to its dock in the kitchen. El watched it go but didn't go after it. She looked back at the man.

"Sick?" she asked. Hopper grunted out what sounded like a yes and rolled over on his side, facing away from the girl. El was suddenly uncomfortable and overwhelmed with worry. She wondered if this was how Hopper felt when he'd found her out in the forest, freezing and sick. It took weeks for her to get better, but he was there every step of the way. She wondered if it would take weeks for him to get better too.

El realized she didn't know where the medicine was. It was foul tasting, but Hopper said that was what cleared her nose and helped her sleep. She also didn't know how to read, so she wouldn't be able to read him the next chapter of *Anne of Green Gables*. Hopper never said if that actually made her better, but she felt like it did.

And El was scared because if it took weeks to get better, she didn't know how she was going to be able to take care of him out here on her own. They only had so much food. In fact, Hopper was planning on making a grocery run that weekend. To El, being sick meant weeks of recovery because that was all she had ever known.

Hopper's loud snoring filled the cabin and El excused herself from the room. She gazed out into the cabin like it was the first time she had ever been there. The girl was lost and had no idea where to start.

Her eyes glanced around the home until they landed where the white phone was hanging by its cord in the space between the counter and the floor. The phone. That was what Hopper used to call Flo and tell her that he was sick, so maybe El could use the phone to call for help too. She considered for a moment who she would ask for help, but the question only lingered briefly. El knew exactly who she would call: Joyce, of course.

She walked over to the kitchen and picked up the plastic phone. It felt lighter than she expected and she let her fingers run over the curly thick white cord that connects it to the dock on the wall. She turned the phone over and her eyes widened at all the buttons on the number pad. This was going to be harder than she thought.

For the moment, she decided to hang the phone up and began to search the kitchen for anything that might give her a clue as to what Joyce's number was. She knew that Hopper had talked to Will's mom before on the phone, so he must have her number somewhere. And, though El had never used a telephone before, she picked up pretty quickly that she just had to press the numbers on the pad in the order they were written. That was how Hopper did it when he ordered takeout for dinner, anyway.

She looked back at the phone. Even if she found the number, she had never talked on the phone before. Well, she had talked into a walkie-talkie, but that felt different for some reason.

Wait. She stopped and then ran to her room, grabbing the radio that was on her bedside table. Of course! It had only been a few weeks, but the boys and Max got her a walkie-talkie for Christmas. All she had to do was find the right channel and she could get in touch with Will, who could talk to his mom.

She turned the dial and pressed the button. "Hello?" she asked and then released. There was static for a while before the telling sound of breathing on the line.

"Who is this? Over." There was a click and then static again.

El pressed the button and the static stopped. "El." She released the button again."

"El? Hey, it's Will! What are you up to? Over."

"Nothing." She frowned. Talking to Will on the radio was much more difficult for her than face to face. She hadn't realized until that moment how much she relied on their facial expressions and tones to tell her if she was saying the right things. She also had no idea why he kept saying "over." "Is mom there?"

"My mom? Uh, yeah I think so. Why? Over."

"Sick."

"You're sick?" Now, Will sounded worried. He didn't even end his sentence with 'over.'

"No, Hopper."

"Oh. Like how sick? Like bad sick? Over."

"Bad sick." El paused. "I think." She paused again. "Over?"

"Yeah, mom can come over," Will replied, mistaking her last word as a question rather than the formality it was meant to be. "I'll get her. Just hang tight."

And then the line went dead, leaving El to wonder where she should hang tightly. She glanced at the door frame, but didn't think she would be able to hold herself there for very long. But, she didn't have to worry because the line clicked on again. "Hey, El? Mom's coming right away! She'll be there soon. Over."

"Thank you," El replied.

"You're welcome!" There was another click and then static until El turned the radio off entirely. She sat there for a moment, unsure of what to do next before she finally walked out of her room and to Hopper's.

She lingered in the doorway for a minute watching as Hopper took uneven, but deep breaths. He seemed to wheeze when he exhaled and he was shivering though he had plenty of blankets on. For the first time in a long time, El felt completely powerless. She wished she could make this all better, so they could go back to eating huge stacks of waffles together while they watched daytime TV. She even longed for Hopper to scold her for staying outside too long or relying on her powers to help clean the house.

But, there were some things her powers couldn't do. That was something she was going to have to accept, that for all the pain her abilities put her through these past few months, she had grown used to them. She relied on them. They were what made her El. But, there were also limits. There would be times when, for better or worse, she would just be a normal kid.

El sat there for a while, contemplating both her power and her powerlessness until there was a knock at the door. Joyce. She jumped up and ran to the front of the house, flinging the door open to find Joyce's worried face staring down at her. El immediately hugged her, not realizing until that moment how scared she was.

"It's okay, honey. It's okay." Joyce soothed as she smoothed El's curly brown locks, "I've got medicine and soup, so we'll be just fine."

And they were. Joyce stayed all night taking care of both Hopper and El. The police chief had no conscious idea that Joyce was coxing him to take some medicine and helping him drink soup. El, on the other hand, was beyond grateful to have Joyce there to help her. They sat on the couch, a blanket tugged around them as Joyce read the previous chapter of *Anne of Green Gables* (El worried Jim would be upset if they continued without him).

El fell asleep on the couch and Joyce carried her to bed and tucked her in and then stayed the whole night with the tiny family.

In the morning, Hopper felt much better, though he still wasn't exactly 'well.' But he was well enough for the first words out of his mouth to be, "What the hell are you doing in my house?" Joyce took it all in stride and, though it took some prodding to get him to admit it, he was grateful Joyce came.

They spent the rest of the day on the couch watching television. El was snuggled in between the two of them while the adults kept a respectable distance. As they watched another sitcom about a wacky family, El wondered if she would ever have a family like what they showed on television. A mom, a dad. Maybe a brother and a dog too.

She looked up at Joyce, who would be leaving soon, and to Hopper, who had been her rock for the past year. This, she figured, was close enough. No, it was better than close enough. It was perfect.

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy New Year!! Back from my Christmas-New Years hiatus with a new chapter of my oneshot series. Thanks for all the support! I had a tough time finishing this one (worked on it on and off until my break) and decided screw it, it's getting finished. I promise any and all requests are noted and on a list and they will be the very next stories I work on! Thanks so much! And yes, I switched tenses. Past tense is easier, present is more artful. Let me know what you like better, I'll probably switch between the two! I will never switch tenses in the middle of a story, though, just in different chapters!

And FYI, this oneshot series absolutely supports Jopper and the stories will likely build to that endgame!

11. School

Summary for the Chapter:

Eleven has a tough first day of school.

Notes for the Chapter:

Requested by user TABMayfield.

Content Warning: use of a derogatory term relating to people with mental challenges

September seemed so far away and then all of a sudden, it was the 9th and El was bouncing around the cabin. She was so hyper, in fact, that Jim nearly forbade her from her favorite sugary breakfast of Eggos and syrup, but he knew he couldn't do that to her. After all, it was her very first day of school and the kid was excited to get to spend all day with her friends, instead of stuck in this stuffy cabin. So, she got her waffles topped high with whipped cream and sprinkles and doused in buttery syrup.

Well, Jim thought as he washed the dishes, those teachers are sure gonna earn their pay today.

El sat by the window, having pulled the kitchen chair over so she could gaze out into the woods. Summer still lingered in the air. The grass and leaves were green, the morning air was warm and comfortable, and El could even hear the birds chirping through the walls of the cabin.

She had woken up at five in the morning, just like a little kid on Christmas Day. Thankfully, she knew better than to wake Hopper up too, so she silently got dressed and then waited until 6:30 when the man finally rolled out of bed.

El had put on a simple blue dress with sensible black shoes, the perfect first day of school outfit and one that Joyce had actually picked out for her. The hair was another story. Her curly brown locks

were adorable but untameable and difficult to manage. She knew if she brushed them out, they'd get poofy and frizzy, which was "in style" as Nancy had told her, but she didn't have all the hair sprays and products she had. So, she grabbed a blue headband and pushed her hair back like Nancy showed her. It wasn't perfect, but it would do.

The girl fussed in front of the mirror for about a half hour, picking at blemishes on her face and tugging at her dress. El was nervous. She'd done more than most thirteen-year-olds, but she'd never been to school before. She couldn't even get a good feel for what school would be like since the boys and Max seemed to have a love-hate relationship with it. One day, they would complain about bullies and homework and the next they were chatting nonstop about what cool science experiment they'd gotten to do.

"Alright, kid. You ready?" Hopper called as he stuffed his wallet in his back pocket. El perked up immediately and nearly fell off the chair.

"Yes! Ready!" She replied and grabbed the purple backpack that Jim bought her the week before. Inside were notebooks, pencils, crayons, and all sorts of school supplies the girl would need.

Hopper couldn't say he was thrilled that El was going off into the world, but she was so happy and excited, and he knew he was making the right decision. He watched as she ran to the truck and scurried up into the passenger's seat. If she'd had the keys, she would have driven off without him!

Jim got in the driver's side and they started down the winding country road to the middle of town where the school was. He glanced over at his daughter, who was vibrating with excitement as she pressed herself against the window to watch the trees go by.

He did worry about her, quite a bit in fact. She had learned so much from Steve, Jonathan, and Nancy tutoring her, but she was still a little behind. He hoped that with real lesson plans and concrete homework, he would be able to catch her up. He'd have her moved into different classes, sign her up for more tutoring, send her to summer school, anything they had to do to help her. He knew El was smart. All he had to do was get her to show her intelligence in a more

uniform setting.

He told the teachers that El was his new adopted daughter, but she'd had a rough few years and didn't speak much. He tried to make her origin story sound as vaguely tragic as possible so they wouldn't ask too many questions, and he seemed to have succeeded. Everyone at the school agreed to keep an eye on her and not expect too much the first few weeks. He also anticipated weekly meetings with her homeroom teacher to make sure she was on track. Anything, he'd decided. He'd do anything for that girl.

One thing he didn't worry about was the other kids. El was already starting at a new school with a leg up on other kids; she already had five friends. And, although he thought all of them were weird as hell and he wished he didn't have to think of Mike and El being *together* together, they were good kids and he felt safe leaving her with them.

They pulled up to the school and Hopper circled around to the parking lot so he didn't have to drop her and keep moving. He put the car in park once he found a space and turned to El who was beaming up at him. He couldn't fight back the smile that blossomed on his face in return.

"Alright, kid, what's your name?" he asked, trying to sound more serious than he actually did.

"Jane," she replied.

"But you'll ask people to call you El..."

"Because my middle name is Ellen."

"Good. And what are you not going to use in school?"

El rolled her eyes and stuck out her lower lip. "Powers."

"Good." Hopper reached over and ruffled her hair a little, careful not to disturb it too much. He didn't have to be awake at five in the morning to know she'd put a lot of effort into her appearance. He then pulled off his bracelet-Sara's bracelet-and handed it to her. "For good luck."

She slipped it on, just as she had during the dance. "Good luck," she repeated. El then smiled expectantly up at Jim and he knew she was waiting for when he would finally release her. He chuckled, reached behind her, and pushed the passenger door open. The girl scrambled out so fast, she nearly fell.

"Have a good day, kid. I'll be here at three."

"Three. Got it. Bye!" She waved at him and then took off running towards the school. Hopper watched her until she disappeared into the double doors.

Hopper tapped on the steering wheel of his truck as he waited in the parking lot for El to show up. He let out a deep sigh, threw his neck back towards the roof of the car, and leaned forward to pop a few joints in his back. He knew he should be more patient. It wasn't even three yet.

His day at work had been grueling. Well, there were a couple traffic stops, a half hour court session he had to show up for, and a woman crying about a lost cat or dog or some kind of pet. But, after battling otherworldly beasts and saving kids from alternate dimensions, a lost pet seemed pretty softball compared to what could be happening.

As he left, the Harrington boy was walking in. Steve was going to shadow a few officers some days out of the week after his college classes. He'd wanted to join the police force right away, but Hopper managed to convince him to get a degree first and then a job was as good as his. It turned out that "If you don't go to college, I'm not getting you shit because I don't have time for another dumbass on my police force" was argument enough.

Finally, the bell rang and instantly kids flooded out of the school. Hopper straightened up and searched the crowd of kids, but he realized he wouldn't be able to tell one from the other until they were in the parking lot.

Thankfully, it only took a few more minutes before he spotted El

marching across the street, over the grassy divider, and into the parking lot where Hopper's truck was. He leaned over and opened the door for her so that a minute later, she could climb into the front seat.

The moment she sat down, he knew something was wrong. She stared straight ahead at the glovebox and her lips were pursed as though she'd sucked on a lemon. He looked her over worriedly, noting that she seemed physically okay, but her shoulders were slumped and she looked completely dejected.

He put the car in drive and eased out of the parking lot. "So, uh. How was school?" he ventured, stealing a glance at El.

"Stupid," she spat.

Okay, so that's where they were. He figured it was normal for the kid not to enjoy school, but it seemed to go deeper. "You hung out with your friends, right?" He couldn't imagine the gang being anything other than perfect angels towards her, but he had to be sure that wasn't the cause of this attitude.

"Yeah," she shrugged bitterly and turned to glare out the window.

Hopper sighed, drummed his fingers on the wheel again and then finally reached over to turn off the radio. "Kid, what happened at school today?" he asked.

For a long moment, El didn't say anything. Hopper worried this would be another one of those issues that he'd have to pry out of her. "Nothing," she said. There was a short pause before she continued, "Bad. Not a good day."

Now they were getting somewhere. "Why was it bad?" Hopper asked.

She didn't respond. Instead, after another moment of thoughtful silence, she asked, "What is 'retarded'?"

"What?" Jim quickly looked at her, his brows furrowed and his mouth opened in shock. "Why would you want to know that?" But, El didn't answer his question and instead just looked back at him with a hard, dejected stare. Hopper turned his attention back to the road. "It

means slow. Held back. Um, not smart, I guess. But it's not a nice word and you should never use it. Who did you hear it from?"

El looked down and then back out the window. "I'm retarded."

Suddenly, Hopper swerved and pulled the car over to the side of the road. Both were pulled forward as the car came to a quick halt and he threw the car into park. He whipped around to El who looked back at him with wide eyes. "No. You. Are. Not," He seethed, pausing between each word. "You are *not*. Who said you were?"

"A boy," El squeaked out. "A few boys. I couldn't answer questions. They said I was retarded."

"They're wrong."

"I didn't get any answers right."

"They are *wrong*."

"No, they're not!" El shrieked suddenly and then promptly burst into tears. Hopper immediately felt bad. Maybe this wasn't the best way to talk to her about this. Wordlessly, he undid his seatbelt and gathered her into his arms. Her wet tears hit his skin and he felt terrible. He wished he could take this pain away from her.

"Kid, I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you. I shouldn't have yelled." He gently pushed her away and looked down at her tear stained face. "But those kids are wrong. You're very smart, school just sucks."

El shook her head. "I don't know anything. I'm stupid. I'll never be smart."

Hopper studied her face for another moment before leaning back. "Do you want to give up, then?" he asked. She looked at him incredulously. "I'm serious. Do you want to stop going?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"What was the best part about today? Not the bad stuff, just the good stuff."

El thought about that for a moment before giving the answer Hopper knew was coming. "Friends."

"Were your friends around when those kids said that to you?"

"Yeah."

"And what happened?"

"Yelled. Made them go away."

Hopper placed a hand on her shoulder as El had the realization that he was hoping she would come to. She didn't want to stop going to school, she just wanted to be treated kindly. And, while that might not happen on its own, she had great friends there who would protect her from bullies.

"Listen, kid, I know it's hard," Hopper started. "I can't even imagine what you're going through. I mean, I was the new kid at some point, but I'd always been in some kind of school. You're starting all over and some kids, they don't understand when other people have tough times. I don't know why they were mean to you, but it's probably 'cause they are either mad about something personal or they don't wanna be the next kid that gets picked on. *That's* what's stupid. But you got your friends and they've got your back."

El pondered this for a moment. She looked up at him with big brown eyes outlined with redness and searched his face. "Not stupid?"

"What? No!" Hopper chuckled and pat the girl on the back. "Stupid? Really? You think someone stupid could learn as much as you have in the past few months? Kid, you went through *hell*. Those kids don't have shit on you. So what if you got a few questions wrong? You saved their asses from the literal end of the world!"

That brought a smile to her face and she leaned over, grabbing Hopper into a hug. He rubbed circles on her back, grateful that she was finally brightening up. It pained him to know that someone had been mean to his little girl, but he was also glad for the opportunity to talk through these feelings with her. That's what Joyce always said, anyway, that the kid needed chances to learn how to deal with

different emotions. And no emotion stung more than the hot anger and deep sadness of some shit kid bullying you on your first day.

"Come on, kid. I'll pick up burgers for dinner okay? Sound good? Then we'll tackle that homework and show them how smart you really are."

El nodded, feeling lighter. Hopper put the car back in drive and started down the road again. She was still a little sad from school, but she was excited to see her friends again.

Besides, it was kind of fun to watch Max beat that mean kid up. But, she figured, Hopper didn't need to know *all* the details.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for the suggestion! I also just want to note that I abhor the use of the 'R' word in a non-academic, insulting manner, but I felt it would be jarring and time period-appropriate.

I'm also on team Max and El being bffs and Max would throw down for her girl.

Thanks for reading!